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## Gendering Cross-Border Networks in the Greater Mekong Subregion: Drawing Invisible Routes to Thailand

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*This article discusses human trafficking within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) in relation to the strengthened inter-state economic and infrastructural co-operation and connectivity, taking the life history of sex workers in Thailand into account. Over the last decades, Thailand became known as a hub of entertainment sectors. Traffickers often use socio-economic integration in the GMS to their advantage. A large number of trafficked women ends up in the Thai entertainment industry doing sex work in confined conditions similar to slavery. Poor women are often lured by false promises of well-paid jobs abroad and pay exorbitant fees to agents for such an opportunity. Intermediaries introduce family members to agents who promise to make arrangements for the relevant documentation and transportation across borders. Traffickers use their own marked routes to transport their prey which are more invisible than generally could be imagined.*

**Keywords:** Trafficking; Borders; Geopolitics; Greater Mekong Subregion; Thailand

*Der vorliegende Beitrag betrachtet den Menschenhandel in der Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) unter Berücksichtigung der Stärkung zwischenstaatlicher wirtschaftlicher und infrastruktureller Kooperation und Vernetzung. Dabei nimmt er Lebensgeschichten Prostituerter in Thailand genauer unter die Lupe. Im Laufe der Jahre wurde Thailand als Drehscheibe des Unterhaltungssektors berühmt. Es ist jedoch weitgehend unbekannt, dass eine Großzahl der Opfer des Menschenhandels in der Sexarbeit und in der Sklaverei ähnlichen Arbeitsverhältnissen landet. Menschenhändler nützen die sozioökonomische Integration in der GMS zu ihrem Vorteil. Diese Studie zeigt, dass von Armut betroffene Frauen in der Regel durch falsche Versprechungen gut bezahlter Arbeitsplätze ins Ausland gelockt werden und für solche Gelegenheiten exorbitante Gebühren an ihre Agenten bezahlen. Vermittler bringen Familienmitglieder und Agenten zusammen, welche die entsprechenden Unterlagen vorbereiten um den Transport über den Grenzübergang möglich zu machen. Menschenhändler nutzen eigene markierte Routen, um ihre Beute zu transportieren – Wege die unsichtbarer sind, als man sich allgemein vorstellt.*

**Schlagworte:** Menschenhandel; Grenzen; Geopolitik; Greater Mekong Subregion; Thailand

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## **Background**

The past decades have witnessed a rapid economic growth in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) brought about largely by trade and tourism. Geopolitical changes in the region's borderlands and border economy have resulted in efforts to strengthen formal inter-state economic and infrastructural connectivity.<sup>3</sup> This rapid growth, however, has led to a massive socioeconomic disparity within the region and created conditions conducive to population mobility within and beyond the region's borders. Today, trafficking in women is one of the most significant offshoots. The general trend of trafficking in women in the region is from Myanmar, the Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Vietnam into Thailand (Lao People's Democratic Republic, 1997).

Since many of the trafficked women and children end up in the sex industry (Jagupta, 2009) there is a correlation between the thriving sex industry in Thailand and the phenomenon of trafficking. The sex industry in Thailand became known when American troops used Thailand as a hub for recreation from the war in Vietnam (Pollock, 2007). Since then, the movement of people and goods has been vastly facilitated by unprecedented advancement in communications and transportation. However, despite positive impacts of communication advancement, trafficking of human beings is often considered to be the result of such contemporary globalisation. Differing understandings of human trafficking have a profound impact on the way both perpetrators and victims are viewed and treated. Therefore, it is crucial to differentiate between smuggling (as related to illegal immigration) and trafficking, in order to better distinguish between victims and willing participants. Though the origins of the trafficking debate date back to the end of the nineteenth century (Derks, 2000), there was no internationally accepted definition of trafficking until the signing of the December 2001 'United Nations' Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons' (Bajrektarevic, 2000; Ullah, 2005a). Trafficking of human beings, internationally agreed upon as a criminal offence, is a serious human rights violation (Department of Justice Canada, 2008).

South-East Asia acts as an important hub in many global trafficking networks, particularly for the purpose of sexual exploitation (Bateman, Ho, & Chan, 2009;

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<sup>3</sup> Thailand shares about 1,810 km of borders with the Lao PDR, about 800 km with Cambodia, 1,800 km with Myanmar, and 503 km with Malaysia.

ECPAT & Sallie, 2010; Larsen, 2010; Piper 2005). South-East Asia is thus notoriously known as a transit region, significant source, and origin of trafficked people. As part of the migration continuum, many trafficked people consent to the initial movement. Some of them realise only at the last leg that they have been deceived and are being exploited (Larsen, 2010). Human trafficking has been linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS in South-East Asia and operates by exploiting the weaknesses of many poor, homeless, and displaced individuals by promising them a better life. A victim is therefore a person who is subjected to exploitation of a kind that goes beyond what other illegal migrants might experience. A key point is that exploitation is part of the process of trafficking (UNODC, 2003). Most individuals are trafficked as migrant workers, domestic slaves, sex workers and sweatshop workers.

In general, victims are moved across international borders. However, domestic trafficking is less likely to be detected due to definitions of trafficking more restrictive than for international trafficking. Most reported cross-border trafficking activity is between countries of the same region, particularly between neighbouring countries. However, global trafficking is also widespread: According to the UNODC (2009), victims from East Asia were “detected in more than 20 countries throughout the world, including Europe, the Americas, the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa” (UNODC, 2009, p.11).

The typologies of trafficking coined by World Vision (2010) should be considered at this point in order to better frame this discussion. World Vision has distinctively divided trafficking into eight categories: labour trafficking; bonded labour; involuntary servitude; involuntary domestic servitude; forced child labour; sex trafficking and prostitution; child soldiers; and child sex tourism (World Vision, 2010).<sup>4</sup> However, not a lot of research takes the severity of the vulnerability of victims along these catego-

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4 “Labour Trafficking is defined as forced labour which does not always involve an economic component. Most instances of forced labour occur as unscrupulous employers take advantage of gaps in law enforcement and legal frameworks to exploit vulnerable workers. Bonded Labour as a form of force or coercion is the use of a bond, or debt, to keep a person under subjugation. In the situation of Involuntary Servitude people become trapped in involuntary servitude when they believe an attempted escape from their situation would result in serious physical harm to themselves or others, or when they are kept in a condition of servitude through the abuse or threatened abuse of the legal processes. In the case of Involuntary Domestic Servitude, domestic workers may be trapped in servitude through the use of force or coercion, such as physical (including sexual) or emotional abuse. Forced Child Labour is defined as the sale and trafficking of children and their entrapment in bonded and forced labour are clearly the worst forms of child labour. Child Soldier is defined as the use of children as soldiers involves the recruitment or abduction of children, through force, fraud, or coercion, in order to exploit them as fighters, labourers, or sex slaves in conflict areas. Sex Trafficking and Prostitution involves the harbouring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act. Sex trafficking would not exist without the demand for commercial sex that is flourishing around the world. Child Sex Tourism involves people who travel from their own country to another for the purpose of engaging in commercial sex acts with children” (World Vision, 2010).

ries to be exploited into account.

Three significant instruments were formed between 1999 and 2000 in order to address this evolving issue. The 'International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention No.182' is one of them, and concerns the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (Dottridge, 2008). The 'Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child' on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography was adopted in 2000 and came into force in January 2002. The most significant one is the 'UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (the UN Trafficking Protocol), supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime'.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the existence of legislation, protocols, and international pressure, it has obviously become challenging for all the countries (party to the Protocols) to combat human trafficking. However, the financial incentives associated with trafficking make it a difficult activity to diminish, if not eradicate. It has been argued that 200,000 to 225,000 women and children from South-East Asia are trafficked annually (Derks, 2000; US State Department, 2011), the region making up one-third of the total amount of global trafficking in women and children, with South Asia having the second largest number of internationally trafficked persons (Derks, 2000; Htay, 1998; Ullah, 2005b). Cambodia, Yunan Province of China, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, which make up the GMS, are all recognised as major trafficking areas within South-East Asia. In addition, a large number of women who have fled from the regime in Myanmar to Thailand have fallen into the hands of traffickers (Derks, 2000). Human trafficking within and from South-East Asia is likely to remain substantial in the coming years in view of the region's recent slow economic recovery from the Global Economic Crisis, and its weak and porous inter-state borders (UNODC, 2008).

Supang (2003) argues that human trafficking from South-East Asia started in the 1960s during the presence of the United States in Indochina, and that clients of the sex trade at that time were American soldiers who used Thailand as a relaxation point, with some also seeking temporary partners. Even after the withdrawal of

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5 "Article 3 of the *UN Trafficking Protocol* contains a definition of human trafficking which applies to cases of both transnational and internal trafficking (although the Protocol supplements a convention about transnational crimes). The definition is different for adults and children (whom the Protocol specifies as anyone less than 18 years of age, whatever the age of adulthood specified by national law). It addresses a range of forms of exploitation (for which people are said to be trafficked), including "the exploitation of the prostitution of others" and "other forms of sexual exploitation" (United Nations, 2000).

the US forces from Indochina in 1975, some women remained in the trade, i.e. some women entered the trade willingly, while others were deceived into believing they would simply have work and/or opportunities abroad. However, they ended up in the sex trade (Supang, 2003; William, 1999).

Thus, over the years, Thailand has become a prominent hub in the conglomeration of entertainment sectors. However, the fact that a large number of trafficked victims end up in sex work in confined conditions similar to slavery is largely unknown. Indeed, Thailand is one of the major source, transit, and destination countries for trafficking in women and children (Piper, 2005). With the increasing economic integration of the GMS since its formation in 1992 as a development project by the Asian Development Bank, the clandestine nature of human mobility has been on the rise across porous and increasingly loosely managed inter-state borders. In some countries, for example Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand, economic growth has brought about greater socio-economic disparities and job competition, leading to an increase in black market economic activities such as trafficking. Piper (2005) argued that trafficking has even gone hand in hand with the economic strengthening and development policies of some countries in South-East Asia. Evidently, it is about demand and supply.

The population of Myanmar has been facing severe social, political, and economic hardships. Many Myanmarese resort to Thailand for survival. Thousands have been escaping to Thailand from the repression against ethnic nationalities by the tyranny. Generally, potential migrants resort to brokers to get to Thailand in order to facilitate navigating the numerous checkpoints and landmines between their home and the border. This is one of the principal ways by which they become vulnerable to trafficking (Pollock, 2007). Also, as the dynamics of the connectivity and human mobility in the region change, traffickers have successfully explored fresh avenues of trafficking in humans, across as well as within the borders of countries in the GMS.

Borders have significant impacts on the economy, culture, and environment of any borderland. However, the majority of the extensive scholarship on the relations between Thailand and the other GMS states considers the impact of the boundary on the borderlands far less than the topic deserves. Although research projects, published scholarly papers, and reports on the dynamics of trafficking in humans in the region are available, there is a lack of systematic research and reliable data. This

is largely due to the clandestine nature of trafficking (Jayagupta, 2009). While the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) produces a lot of important research based on empirical information, the estimates always remain anecdotal. I refer to one study of UNIAP saying that “the actual figure of trafficking incidence is believed to be somewhat larger than the number stated” (UNIAP, 2011, p.6 & p.19).

What is not sufficiently known is by what kinds of promises and premises the victims are motivated to set off, what trans-border networks they take to get to destinations, how long it takes to get there, what hardships they suffer en route, and where a sizeable number of trafficked victims ends up. This paper attempts to answer these questions based on empirical information and conceptual supplementation. The primary purpose of our research has been to better understand the routes taken by the respondents to get to Thailand. The fundamental argument the paper puts forward is that economic and social integration within the region has proliferated and intensified the web of regional networks of trafficking.

All of these factors are of crucial importance for the economic integration and transportation connectivity in the region. One of the sufferings pertaining to trafficking was enlightened by the study of Lisborg and Sine (2009), in which they assert that in debt bondage many of the victims eventually resigned themselves to the situation when they fail to escape. Exorbitant amounts of money, often surreptitious at the initial stage, and artificial debts “well beyond the actual costs of travel and seldom known or agreed to by the woman” (Lisborg & Sine, 2009, p.15) were a significant method of control. Lisborg and Sine argue that even when migrants enter prostitution consensually, it becomes sexual exploitation when a woman is forced to accept unreasonable debt. They obviously experience “physical, psychological or sexual abuse or some other form of labour abuse, including confinement with threats, coercion or force” (Lisborg & Sine, 2009, p.24 & p.33). According to one of UNODC’s (2009) studies in 52 countries on the form of exploitation, 79 percent of the victims were subjected to sexual exploitation. “While it remains likely that labour exploitation and male victims are relatively under-detected, the over-representation of sexually exploited women is true across regions, even in countries where other forms of trafficking are routinely detected” (UNODC, 2009, p.3).

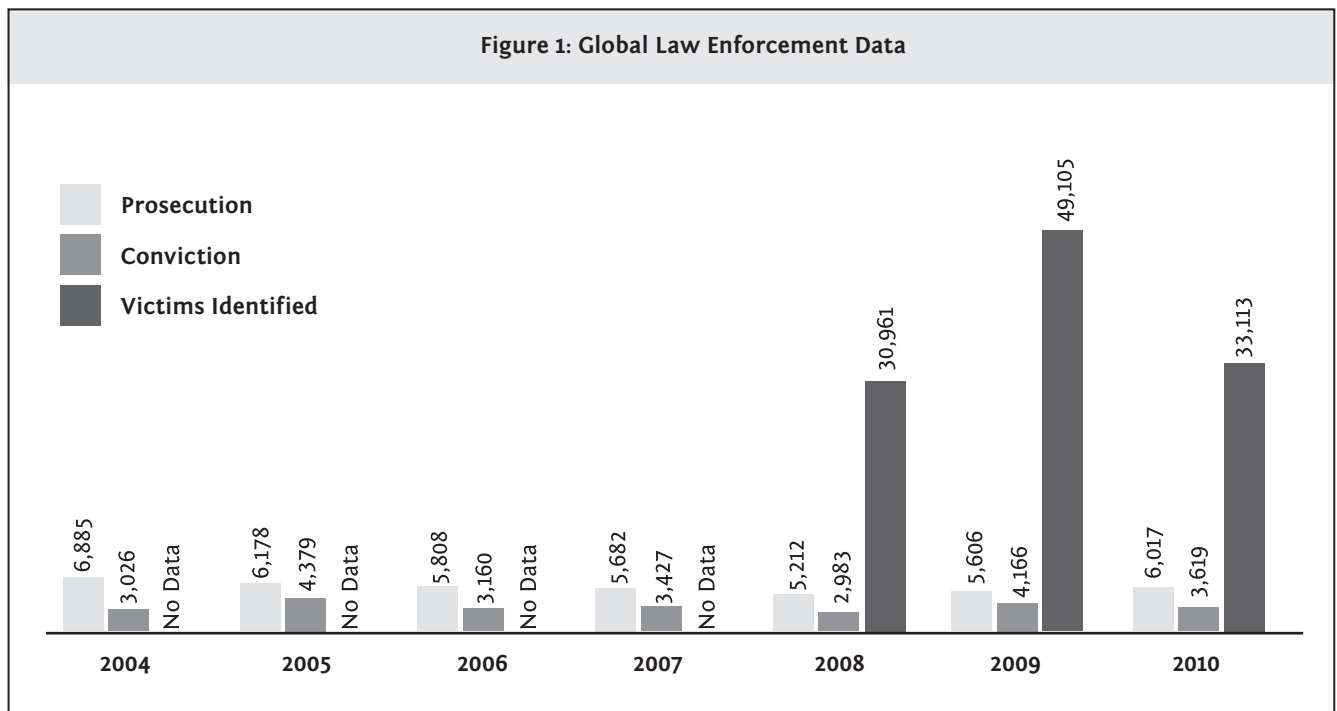
Clearly, the paucity of data on trafficking is largely attributed to the clandestine



nature of this phenomenon. Laczko and June (2003) claim, however, that the police cannot be relied upon to deliver even the trafficking data needed to help fight trafficking. Law enforcement agencies tend to give a low priority to combating trafficking due to inadequate or unimplemented legislation (Laczko & June, 2003, pp.4-5). However, human trafficking is becoming a political priority. In September 2002, the European Union (EU) conference on ‘Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings’ resulted in the Brussels Declaration, drawing policy recommendations to the EU on trafficking. The United States made trafficking a prioritised political agenda.

Various institutions and groups have made efforts on multiple fronts to combat the human trafficking problem. Legislators, law enforcement, prosecutors, immigrant advocacy organizations, legal advocates, faith-based organizations, victim advocates, and social service providers have responded with a range of prevention, intervention, and treatment strategies to address the crime. (Clawson, Dutch, & Cummings, 2006, p.3)

The ‘Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorisation Act’ (TVPRA) of 2003 requires that foreign governments provide the US Department of State with data on trafficking investigations, prosecutions, convictions, and sentences. This Act provides the foreign governments with the opportunity to be considered in full compliance for



Source: US State Department (2011, pp. 38-39)



Tier placement<sup>6</sup> with the TVPA's minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking (US TIP Report, 2011). Figure 1 shows the global data on prosecution, conviction and victims identified.

## Methodology

A well-designed checklist was used to conduct in-depth interviews prior to which a field-testing was conducted. The selection of respondents was based on their meeting some of the following requirements: a stay in Thailand of at least one year; nationals of ASEAN countries; having resorted to and/or been trapped by traffickers or agents to get to their destinations. The selection of interview spots rested on the decision of *Tuktuk* drivers. For example, we were approached by such a driver in Bangkok's Sukhumvit Road to get us to a so-called 'massage parlour'. We then sought his assistance in doing our research. We explained the purpose of the research, and he comfortably agreed to help us out. We selected him for his good conversational skills in English and Lao, and because Thai was his mother tongue. We recruited four experienced research assistants (from Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Indonesia) for conducting interviews

with the respondents from each respective country. They were selected at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) in Thailand. The researchers had a conversational level of command in Thai. They conducted interviews of the Thai and Laotian respondents, again with the help of the *Tuktuk* drivers. Deliberately excluded were those who were not from the ASEAN region, stayed less than a year, and/or came on their own to their destination.

As Table 1 shows, the study is based on primary information collected through a survey of

**Table 1: Sample Distribution**

Countries of Origin	<i>f</i>	%
Cambodia	29	31
Lao PDR	24	25
Myanmar	19	20
Vietnam	15	17
Indonesia	7	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Authors' Field Data

6 "US Department of State places each country in the 2011 TIP Report onto one of three tiers, as mandated by the TVPA. This placement is based more on the extent of government action to combat trafficking than on the size of the problem. The extent of governments' efforts to reach compliance with the TVPA's minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking determines which Tier the respective country would be placed. While Tier 1 is the highest ranking, it does not mean that a country has no human trafficking problem. Rather, a Tier 1 ranking indicates that a government has acknowledged the existence of human trafficking, has made efforts to address the problem, and meets the TVPA's minimum standards. Each year, governments need to demonstrate appreciable progress in combating trafficking to maintain a Tier 1 ranking" (US TIP Report, 2011, pp. 404-405).

94 female respondents living in Thailand. The Tuk-tuk driver hired for initiating the interviews claimed to be familiar with a number of places in Bangkok (Pahurat, Silom, Sukumvit, Mo Chit, and Lumpini), where trafficked victims operate in confined and restrictive conditions. We were estimating to meet more than 150 potential respondents during the six month-period of research. However, we ended up with interviewing only 94. Many more were interested in sharing their experiences, but we had to exclude them, as they did not satisfy the set out criteria.

Generally, multiple visits were required as respondents were not able to spare long stretches of time required for the interview. Some respondents requested to be revisited as they wanted to say something in absence of their 'madam' or 'pimp', under whose control they operate. For some cases, we attempted to revisit the respondents who made such a request and whom we thought had a wealth of information to impart. However, in only two cases we were successful in gaining access again. Other prostitutes were either busy with their clients or overseen by their madam or pimp. However, the second visits were, in fact, requested, as it was later revealed, to share their woes, and they wanted to know if there were ways they could out of their current predicaments, which were remotely linked to the research objectives. In some cases, the madam/pimp offered us access to talk to the respondents when they were assured that the information to be provided would be used only for research purposes. Some of them agreed on conditions that we pay for the time we took talking to them. We would term this condition as normal however, in some cases we experienced verbal harassment and were simply turned down on the gate when we explained our purpose.

In order to analyse the data, qualitative techniques were used and some descriptive statistics were applied to show the magnitude of the phenomenon. As for the major challenges in the research, respondents in many cases were not able to recollect the names of the specific spots/points where they were handed over to another group of traffickers, and the routes they took; some of them also failed to recall how long it took for them to get to Thailand. Since this research involved human subjects, ethical approval was obtained. It was made sure that the consent of the respondents was given voluntarily. They were given the assurance before the consent was given that they could withdraw from the interview anytime. Their psychological issues were taken care of.

## ***Findings***

Thailand, located in a strategic position in South-East Asia, has long been attracting tourists and entertainers. The entertainment industry has given new height to the reputation of Thailand among world tourists. However, what is generally known about Thailand entertainers is different from the picture this study has revealed. Women are lured abroad by false promises of well-paid jobs as dancers, waitresses, and domestic workers and have to pay a fee to an 'agent' for these opportunities. Generally, provincial intermediaries introduce members of families to agents who promise to arrange the relevant documentation and transportation across borders (for more see Ullah, 2009). Traffickers specifically target individuals who are vulnerable women because they are often easiest to recruit and control and are least likely to be protected by law enforcement. Most of the respondents were lured out of their localities by traffickers with the help of local illicit agents.

The findings of this study resonate with the findings of many other research projects (Saboreidin, 1993; Lin, 1998; Kabeer, 2003). Most of the women and girls caught in trafficking and forced prostitution in Thailand are caught in debt bondage. Debt bondage makes the trafficked person dependent on their traffickers, since victims often need to pay back the debt, which consequently make some women and girls susceptible to being forced into prostitution (Jayagupta, 2009). Once out of their home country, agents confiscate their documents and they are then sold or taken, by prior arrangement, to brothel owners who force them to work as sex workers. In order to recover their documents they are obliged to pay the 'debt' incurred for their procurement, transportation, food, and housing. Most women are hard pressed to pay for their freedom, whilst some find themselves resold.

As mentioned before, the study subjects differ from generally perceived sex workers in Thailand as they do not have choice or freedom and they operate clandestinely under the strict vigilance of their leaders/pimps. They are stripped of their agency and as a result they cannot protest, refuse demands or disobey. Thailand's Immigration Act is often used not to keep returnees from entering Thailand, but to ensure compliance and obedience once they are there. This is particularly true in the case of women and girls trafficked into prostitution, who enter Thailand under the knowledge of border guards and police (Hayes, 1999; Reddi, 2003).

Any kind of integration helps build trust among neighbouring nations making human mobility trouble-free.<sup>7</sup> Today in the GMS, socio-economic integration and connectivity, in its myriad forms, have become synonymous. Illicit traffickers often use this integration to their advantage. This study demonstrates that poor women are generally lured by false promises of well-paid jobs abroad, and pay exorbitant fees to agents for such opportunities (Ullah, 2009). It demonstrates that the majority of the respondents (68 percent) were promised better jobs either in Thailand; or in East Asian countries (South Korea, Hong Kong or Taiwan) or Europe (29 percent). Most of the respondents (62 percent) were caught in trafficking, forced prostitution, and debt-bondage. Most of them had their documents confiscated by their agents or taken away by owners who forced them to engage in sex work. Their position was made vulnerable to ensure that they remain at the mercy of their employers.

### ***Cross-Border Networks and Trafficking Routes***

The migration route is a significant part of the migration process. A great part of migrants' journeys from their home countries to their points of departure for their destinations is inevitably facilitated with the help of networks (Ullah, 2009). However, trafficked-victims' routes are generally not the same as those of other migrants. Thailand's prosperity attracts migrants from neighbouring countries who flee conditions of poverty in the Lao PDR, Indonesia, and Cambodia and in some circumstances military repression such as in Myanmar. Significant illegal migration to Thailand presents traffickers with opportunities to force, coerce, and/or defraud undocumented migrants into involuntary servitude and/or sexual exploitation. Women and children are trafficked from Myanmar, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, Russia, and Uzbekistan for commercial sexual exploitation in Thailand (Ullah, 2009). A large proportion of these individuals, especially from Indonesia, Cambodia, the Lao PDR, and Vietnam, are trafficked through Thailand's southern border - sometimes through third countries like Malaysia (especially through Johor Bahru) - into Thailand for the purpose of sexual exploitation. One study by Ullah (2009) discovered a number of routes trafficked victims travelled to get to

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7 As is true today within the ASEAN and European Union and to some extent in the SAARC.

Kota Bahru, Malaysia, through which they can easily get to Thailand. While many women and children are trafficked into exploitative circumstances, there are also men who go abroad and suffer a similar destiny, which, however, is not considered to be trafficking (IOM, 2004:13).<sup>8</sup> Ethnic minorities who have not received legal residency or citizenship are especially at risk for being trafficked both internally and abroad (Ullah, 2009). Children from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia are trafficked into forced begging and exploitative labour in Thailand. Four key sectors of the Thai economy, fishing, construction, commercial agriculture, and domestic work, rely heavily on undocumented migrants from Myanmar, including children, as cheap and exploitable labourers (IOM, 1998).

This study has mapped out nine routes the respondents travelled to get to their destinations: Cambodia-through Jungle- through Sea- Thailand; Cambodia-through Thai border- Thailand; Indonesia- through Malaysia- through Jungle- through Sea- Thailand; Indonesia-Sea-Singapore- through mountainous Jungle-Malaysia-Thailand; Myanmar-through Lao PDR-through Sea-Thailand; Myanmar—through Thai Border-Thailand; Lao PDR-through Thai border-Thailand; Lao PDR-through Sea-through mountains- Thailand; and Vietnam-through Lao PDR- through Sea-Thailand. The routes identified by the study demonstrate that the respondents did not have any direct routes to take to their destinations. In addition, the treacherous and difficult nature of the routes provide evidence that supports the impossibility of denying the fact that trafficked victims suffer countless hardships on the routes through which they are forcibly transported. At new transit points, the victims were handed over to new groups of traffickers. Of the most dangerous routes, as high as 9 percent of the total respondents (n=94) were trafficked through them from Myanmar; 23 percent from Cambodia, 6 percent from Indonesia and 16 percent from Vietnam (Table 2). Across source countries, the forms of routes vary.<sup>9</sup>

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8 "Trafficking in persons" shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or of the giving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation." The definition of trafficking in human beings, included in the 2000 United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (supplementing the Convention against Transnational Organised Crime) illustrates the process character of the phenomenon. This process is a continuum of events taking place in many locations, involving internationally linked criminal operators contributing their "services" (recruitment, transport, accommodation, document forgery, pimping, intimidation etc.) in various stages (United Nations, 2000).

9 Two main overland routes are currently used most often; they are Keng Tung-Tachilek-Mae Sai Chiang Mai route and a route connecting Myawaddy and the Thai border town of Mae Sot, six miles across the Moei border river. The main border outposts along the Thai side of the border are Mae Sai, Mae Hong Son and Mae Sariang in Chiang Rai Province, Mae Sot in Tak Province, and Kra Buri and Ranong in the southern tip of Thailand (Derks, 2000; Bajrektarevic, 2000).

**Table 2. Routes Travelled (Multiple Response)**

	Routes	<i>f</i>	%
	<b>Cambodia &lt; Jungle / Sea &gt; Thailand*</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>
	<b>Cambodia &lt; Thai Border &gt; Thailand</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>7</b>
	<b>Indonesia &lt; Malaysia / Jungle / Sea &gt; Thailand*</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>
	<b>Indonesia &lt; Sea / Singapore / Mountainous Jungle / Malaysia &gt; Thailand*</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>
	<b>Myanmar &lt; Lao PDR / Sea &gt; Thailand*</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>
	<b>Myanmar &lt; Thai Border &gt; Thailand</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
	<b>Lao PDR &lt; Thai Border &gt; Thailand</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>9</b>
	<b>Lao PDR &lt; Sea / Mountains &gt; Thailand*</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>
	<b>Vietnam &lt; Lao PDR / Sea &gt; Thailand*</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>16</b>

\* Refers to most dangerous routes. We consider those routes dangerous by taking some variables into account such as: time taken to get to destination; abuse en route; how smooth was the journey in terms of food supply, obstacles by law enforcing agencies, border guards etc. Respondents often mentioned that it took 10 days to one month to get to the destinations. They were forced to take deep jungles and mountain to avoid the gaze of law enforcing agencies at the dead of night. They reported being bitten by big leeches; had either major or minor wounds by running into trees or stumbling on their way at night. Many others suffered dehydration and some suffered fever and jaundice. The majority reported weaknesses due to lack of sufficient food and due to mental stress, fear and uncertainty (Ullah, 2009).

Source: Authors' Survey

Of the total, 63 percent reported being sexually abused on their routes; 29 percent reported being verbally abused, 57 percent reported being served meagre food; and 36 percent reported receiving threats from the traffickers. The respondents were also handed over to many groups of people at different points. Of the total respondents, 32 percent reported to have been handed over to at least two groups of people who they had never met before at two different points; and 43 percent reported that they had been handed over to other groups at three to four points in the dead of the night.

The data show that 12 percent of the respondents from Cambodia, 58 percent from the Lao PDR, 41 percent from Myanmar and 12 percent from Indonesia reported to have taken one to five days to get to their destinations; and that 67 percent Cambodians, 21 percent Laotians, 29 percent Myanmarers and 12 percent Indonesians took five to 10 days to get to their destinations. Of the total respondents, 23 percent spent more than 20 days to get to their destinations.<sup>10</sup> Obviously, they did not take the

<sup>10</sup> Whilst on the Burmese side of the border there have been areas where official state functionaries have not dared to set foot, on the Thai side any movements across the border are quickly picked up by the Thai police.

time normally expected. Here, normal expectation is explained by two factors: first, the promise given to them about the time to be spent on the way by the traffickers and second is the optimal time required in a normal case. Most of the respondents were told it would take one to three days, at best. The ordeals they had on the way were in no way projected and expected. The complex routes speak well as to why the respondents took so long to get their destinations.

### ***Conclusions and policy implications***

Border crossing by illicit traffickers is not a new phenomenon. No region in the world goes without experiencing trafficking. Interestingly, while European nations saw a declining trend in the inter-state trafficking of humans, despite the strengthening of economic relations, a reverse picture appears in the SEA region regardless of a similar regional economic relationship. Therefore, it is arguable that borderland geopolitics has tended to work in favour of traffickers. In human trafficking the exploiter takes the form of a recruiter who is generally the person who makes initial contact with the victim and makes the promise of a better life. The victims are highly vulnerable due to a combination of factors, including lack of legal status and protections, limited language skills, poverty and migration-related debts, and social isolation. Traffickers are often from a similar ethnic or national background as the individuals they victimise. The victims are then frequently dependent on the traffickers for employment and/or financial support in the foreign country of destination. Pimps and sex traffickers target young children, as they are skilled at manipulating the children and maintaining control, and can often gain their loyalty through a combination of affection and violence.

Traffickers use their own marked routes to transport their prey, which are often more invisible than generally imagined. The economic, environmental and cultural geography of borderlands are all greatly influenced by their proximity to the boundary (Prescot, 1987). The most important finding of the study is that when all the source countries (in the study) share borders with Thailand, the respondents spent seven days to get to Thailand on average, and obviously en route they were exposed to various forms of abuse. Widespread complaints from the respondents were directed against the border guards and police who allowed traffickers to continue their



trade. Indeed, the trafficking of women and girls into Thailand was done with the knowledge and complicity of border guards and police. The phenomenon of borderlands next to open international borders deserves further attention by geographers.

This study has crucial policy implications regionally as well as globally. However, it is evident from the limited academic literature that it is time to undertake more research initiatives to explore the impact of such invisible routes on neighbouring economies, border relations, and human rights. Trafficked victims need to be acknowledged and entitled to protection, assistance and redress in their own right, regardless of their willingness or capacity to press charges and/or give testimony against their traffickers. It is still very difficult to prosecute those who are responsible for the trafficking of persons due to the clandestineness and networking that occurs whilst people are moved from one place to another.

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